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Art, Culture & Social Justice: Critical Thinking and Writing II

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“Moving Forward,” Propelled by Our Past

In a rare stroke of California weather, my first visit to the de Saisset Museum is accompanied by the only winter storm in recent memory. Eager to escape the rain, I rush towards the museum, muscle through the heavy doors, and step inside with my head down. When I finally dry my shoes, take off my hood and look around a bit, I realize I have two choices: color, or no color. To my left is Robert Fried’s exhibition: an auditorium filled with concert posters of old. Bursting, acidic colors of the sixties and seventies surround me. As starkly different as the posters are from the posters of today, I can still find elements that are currently in style. The evolution of the poster from Fried’s time to today offers a sense of where we are headed based on where we have been. I exit the auditorium and return to my starting point. To my right are two rooms that comprise the *Virgin Landscape: Representations of Women and the American West* exhibition. These images are primarily black and white, with only select images featuring color. Purposefully void of life-giving tinct, these images, much like Fried’s posters, propose our current direction based on the journey behind us. Through the acknowledgment of historical American brutality upon certain peoples, the prints challenge the reader to consider where the country is headed, and who today’s hidden victims are.

Again, I retreat to my starting point. No matter which option I choose, I am presented with my future via my past. Clearly, this is a theme the museum prides itself on (a theme well-chosen, I must say), yet I feel disconnected from both exhibitions. It is not until I venture into

the basement of the de Saisset that I find what I am looking for. It is here, within the foundation of the museum and in many ways the foundation of Santa Clara University itself, that I discover what I consider to be *my* history. History of the Gold Rush, native peoples, and the university span several rooms in the forms of photographs, paintings, recreations and actual artifacts of the period. Much like the other two exhibitions, and the title of the exhibition's accompanying iBook, the *California History* exhibition is centered on "Moving Forward" from where we once were. The creators of all the objects are too numerous to name, and the artworks displayed do not follow a general theme as the multiple artists of the other exhibitions do. However, the lack of theme only serves to enhance the exhibition. As I come to realize, history does not always follow one certain theme; the university is amidst one phase now, it was amidst another phase in 1851 when it opened, and showcased within the exhibition are all the phases in between.

The *California History* exhibition is permanent, and for good reason. Not only am I able to glean the clearest indication of our future from this exhibit, but it is also, quite simply, the most interesting exhibition to the Santa Clara student. Showcased Santa Clara College Bank currency, for example, offers a way for the meal-point-wielding students of today to feel connected to their Santa Clara University—or rather, Santa Clara College, as it was called in the early 1900s—alumni. College currency, antiquated state-of-the-art scientific instruments, and used paint palettes from the 1800s—all tangible *things*—open the portal to the past more than mere images can. While a painting of the university circa 1851 *looks* impressive, there is something about seeing Ernest de Saisset's own 1876 palette that really brings the history to life. While I can certainly appreciate de Saisset's skill as a painter by viewing one of his paintings, I can imagine shaking his hand by seeing his palette. Through the tangibility of the objects contained in the *California History* exhibition, I am able to imagine what relationship I might

have had with the original owner of each of the objects on display—something I was not able to do with the two exhibitions on the main floor. More than anything, the exhibition helps me to build a robust sense of my past, and thus a more complete sense of my future. Quite simply, the items on display make the history of Santa Clara University matter to me in a way it didn't before.

As I peruse the multiple rooms, the artifact I gravitate towards most is the 19th-century bishop's chair. Raised on a pedestal with a tapestry behind it, it exudes power. Immediately, it is clear that reverence is appropriate, not because of those who have sat in it, but because it tells a story. The thousands, if not millions, of people that attended mass before this chair flash to mind, as well as the select few who could call this chair "the office." A rope closes off the chair for newcomers of this century, which only adds to its wonder. However, as the fog of sermons past begins to clear and I start to process how the chair actually looks, I realize what a visual let-down the chair is. It certainly looks like an 1800s bishop's chair, but after being played up so much in my head, its brown-on-brown leather seating and wood construction seems awfully plain. Some of the most ornately decorated objects I have ever seen, spanning several hundred years, are on display, and this is not one of them. This chair is exactly that: just a chair.

Suddenly, I realize why I feel so connected to this exhibition. It's not about the *things* that I'm looking at, or the *objects* in the room adjacent to me, or the *stuff* over there on the other side of the room; it's about the people that make all these things come to life. It's about the *people* that make these things more than just things. The only reason I am in awe of this chair is because I know it supported someone who supported many others. And the only reason I feel connected to the Santa Clara currency is because many years ago, back when students wore ties to class, it was likely causing some other Bronco frustration. The bishop's chair, just like

everything else down here in this basement, is important to me because it presents the possibility that the objects in *my* life can one day be historically significant; it enables the mundane life I live to perhaps one day be extraordinary to someone else.

I decide it is time for me to leave. As I walk past artifacts from natives and gold miners, I cast one final look towards a photograph of an aeroplane built by a Santa Clara University professor that predates the Wright Brothers' craft, and towards a hair comb of old. As I realize the absurdity of placing an aircraft on the same plane as a hollowed-out tortoise shell with some prongs carved in it, I ask myself: "What age am I living through that will one day be marveled at by someone else, and what type of relationship will be formed with future viewers based on the objects I'm leaving behind?"

I ascend back onto the main level of the museum. I slowly walk past the two other exhibitions on my way out. This time, I identify more scenes and recognizable images from the concert posters, and not just bursts of color. And I see more emotion in the eyes and land of the *Virgin Landscape* than I did the first walkthrough.

I walk outside to see that the rain has stopped. I cast my eyes to the mission, marveling at its age and impact. As I set off towards my dorm, I realize just what a unique and powerful mixture of old and new I am a part of.